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# Is Japan really winding back on nuclear?

Martin Dusingberre

Foreign media have read too much into the Japanese PM's comments - and pro-nuclear feeling runs deep at a local level



A pro-nuclear billboard in the Kaminoseki municipality of Japan. Photograph: Martin Dusingberre

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A Japanese colleague once compared politics in his country with the movement of a swan: serene so far as one can see but with furious paddling beneath the surface of the water.

Following the recent announcement from Naoto Kan, the prime minister, that Japan would "start from scratch" with regard to future nuclear power expansion, we can be sure that there is plenty of paddling in Tokyo. This will be especially true within the network of electricity companies and government officials that make up Japan's "nuclear village".

The foreign media have interpreted Kan's statement as the government abandoning the construction of new nuclear power plants. But Japanese newspapers did not report it as such, and Kan's exact words - "we need to go back to the drawing board and have a debate" - are characteristically vague. After all, one can go back to the drawing board and draw roughly the same picture.

My scepticism regarding Kan's statement comes from knowing a very different nuclear

village. Kaminoseki, population 3,700, is located 50 miles south-west of Hiroshima and is the site of Japan's newest proposed nuclear power plant. If the prime minister were to visit the municipality, he would see a number of advertising boards, all drawing a similar picture. "Together with nuclear power, a lively town," announces one, on the main road.

Beneath the slogan, and against the backdrop of two large reactors, a mother, father and young boy are depicted enjoying a spring day's picnic - a nuclear family, as it were. The image suggests that rethinking nuclear policy in Japan will be far from straightforward.

For a start, Kaminoseki leaders actively invited the construction of a nuclear power station back in the early 1980s, an example not of "nimby" but of "definitely in my back yard".

That decision triggered a vociferous protest movement in one district of the town, delaying construction by almost 30 years. In the meantime, however, the local electricity company and the pro-nuclear lobby sold townspeople a vision of a "bright" and "lively" future. In particular, they presented the nuclear power station plan as the only way to save the town from the twin horrors of depopulation and ageing that blight much of rural Japan.

Hard cash has backed up that vision, as part of the central government's apparatus of incentives offered to potential host communities. Despite the fact that 50% of the town's population is aged 65 or over, Kaminoseki boasts a state-of-the-art elementary school and a new hot-spring resort is under construction. Appealing to the type of young family depicted in the roadside sign, the town subsidises nappies to the tune of ¥5,000 (£37) a month. All these investments grow out of the promise of a new nuclear power plant, construction of which finally started in February 2011 but was suspended after the earthquake and tsunami.

When I last visited Kaminoseki three weeks ago, one man told me that although nuclear power was frightening, the prospect of not building the Kaminoseki plant was even more frightening. Similarly, a pro-nuclear town councillor wrote of the "crisis-like situation" not in Fukushima, as one might expect, but in Kaminoseki. "We must bring the nuclear plant to fruition as soon as possible," he added.

According to this logic, to abandon new nuclear power construction would be to abandon the Kaminoseki townspeople. More significantly, it would be to write off billions of yen of investment and advance compensation paid out by central government and electricity company alike. Given the strength of pro-nuclear feeling among Kaminoseki bureaucrats, even in the wake of Fukushima, I would be surprised if Kan's drawing board changes went that far.

In a country where nuclear politics has long lacked transparency at both national and local levels, the prime minister's ambiguous comments will further muddy the waters of an already complex debate.

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